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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 002697

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [MOPS](#) [SY](#) [IS](#)  
SUBJECT: BERRI CRITICAL OF BASHAR'S SPEECH

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason 1.4(d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) In an August 18 meeting with Ambassador Feltman and poloff, Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament Nabih Berri hailed the deployment of the Lebanese armed forces (LAF) south of the Litani River. The longtime leader of the Shi'a Amal party and a reluctant political ally of Hizballah, Berri cautioned that the Government of Lebanon (GOL) must launch a serious and immediate reconstruction effort, preferably through the vehicle of the Berri-controlled Council for the South. Otherwise, no one can really blame Hizballah for filling the vacuum left by government inaction (for example, by offering cash handouts to those whose homes were destroyed in the fighting). Deeply critical of Bashar al-Asad's August 15 speech, which he described as "stupid," Berri said that the Syrian leadership should try and be more supportive of the GOL and Lebanese unity. Seeming blithely unaware that Syria may already be rearming Hizballah, Berri demanded of the Ambassador that the ports and airports be reopened immediately. Berri added that any monitoring mechanism to block arms smuggling was something for the GOL to discuss with the UN, and not with the U.S. or Israel. Berri's senior foreign policy adviser Ali Hamdan also attended the meeting.  
END SUMMARY.

HAPPY WITH LAF DEPLOYMENT

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¶2. (C) Berri described the LAF deployment to the South as "very, very, very big," noting that the army had not been in the region in any effective force since 1969. When the Ambassador asked if Berri had ridden into the South on the first LAF jeep, as he had promised he would do, Berri laughed and said he had done much more than that just in working to bring about a consensus for the deployment. Calling the decision by some March 14 ministers to press for immediate Hizballah disarmament a "big mistake," a clearly worn-out Berri said he had worked "very hard" over the last few days to mend the rift.

NEED TO REBUILD

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¶3. (C) When the Ambassador noted that Hassan Nasrallah is making Hizballah out to be more powerful than the state, offering \$10-12,000 cash to every family that lost a home

destroyed in the war and sending in bulldozers flying Hizballah flags, Berri exclaimed, "Tell that to Siniora, not to me." He said he has been trying to get Siniora to discuss the rebuilding effort, noting that the reconstruction establishment -- including money sieves like the Council for the South, suspected to have funded numerous shopping excursions for Berri's wife Randa -- is already in place. All that's required now is a plan and someone to communicate it to the Lebanese people. "What we need is a declaration to the nation from Siniora. If only Siniora could do what Nasrallah did."

14. (C) Berri said that Siniora asked him for a cost estimate for the reconstruction of southern villages, and promised to give him a cheque to cover it (Comment. This surprised us, as it would not be in keeping with the usually tight-fisted Siniora, a former Minister of Finance. End Comment). Noting that Amal MP Ali Hassan Khalil is meeting with Siniora also on 8/18 to further discuss the rebuilding effort, Berri said that there is still time to beat Hizballah to the punch on rebuilding. Hizballah, Berri claimed, has not actually begun handing out the promised cash, but has initially set up a "committee to assess statistics" and process claims. (Note. Though Lebanese television on 8/18 claimed that the handouts have begun. End Note.)

15. (C) Remarking that "people will remember who put the roof over their heads," Berri wants to convince Siniora of his scheme for rebuilding houses in the southern villages. Berri said it is more important to rebuild in the South first, rather than the Beirut suburbs, otherwise people from the destroyed southern villages will migrate permanently to the cities. Berri's plan is to give each family which lost

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its home in the war \$9,000-\$11,000 to pay for rent and furniture for a year. The GOL, through the vehicle of the Council for the South, would meanwhile begin building hundreds of 200-square meter homes in the southern villages. Essentially, these would be "starter homes," with the families then responsible for later expansion. Future tenants could then repay the government for the homes in installments -- at \$200 per square meter, Berri estimates the cost of each home at \$40,000. An alternative to this plan, said Berri, would be to ship in pre-fabricated housing. Berri cautioned that the GOL would need to get moving on his plan immediately since, with the onset of winter in two months' time, "it will turn into a bigger catastrophe."

16. (C) Touching briefly on the Beirut southern suburbs, Berri said these pose another "big problem," estimating that at least 100 large apartment blocks were completely destroyed by the bombing. Berri told the Ambassador that the Kuwaiti Khorrafi family (NFI) will establish a non-profit organization to rebuild the suburbs, while noting that Saudi Arabia has committed \$500 million and Kuwait a further \$300 million for reconstruction. Also, Berri said that the UAE will soon announce that it intends to rebuild all of the schools in the South, as well as the hospitals of Bint Jbeil and Meiss al-Jebel and the port at Ouzai, and provide assistance with humanitarian demining (which the UAE has helped with previously in Lebanon, with success).

"BASHAR HAS DONE A MISTAKE"

17. (C) Describing Bashar al-Asad's belligerent 8/15 speech as "stupid and unbelievable," Berri criticized conspicuous Syrian attempts to interfere in Lebanon. Berri said he had only just spoken with Syrian Vice President Farouq Al-Shara on the evening of 8/14, and had in fact thanked Shara for his "low-key" approach in saying that Syria supported the GOL decision on UNSCR 1701. This made Bashar's bombastic speech -- with its proclamations of treachery and civil war in Lebanon -- all the more astonishing to Berri. "Bashar has done a mistake," said Berri in his broken English, adding,

"It is stupid. Now people forgot all about the Israelis."

#### GETTING THE SIEGE LIFTED

18. (C) Claiming that it is "the job" of the USG to "tell the Israelis to lift the siege on ports and airports," Berri said that this is a clear obligation under UNSCR 1701. The Ambassador replied that the GOL needs to do more to put effective monitoring mechanisms in place first, since this is also called for in the resolution. Letting down his guard a bit, Berri commented that he has both a private and a political opinion on the matter. His private opinion is that "when the U.S. stops giving bombs to Israel, then you can demand that we block the arms." Acknowledging though that his private opinion is not GOL policy, he said that his political opinion is that the GOL needs to be able to apply UNSCR 1701, and in order to have the siege lifted needs to put some measures in place at points of entry. However, he stressed, it is not the GOL's obligation to tell the Israelis or anyone else besides the UN about what exactly it is doing on monitoring.

19. (C) Nevertheless, Berri did share with the Ambassador some of the changes at Rafiq Hariri Beirut International Airport (BIA). Noting with some annoyance that "I was not consulted on these changes," Berri remarked that the LAF had been replaced by the Hariri-affiliated Internal Security Forces (ISF) in overseeing airport security. In addition, with the blessing of the March 14 movement, a coordinating committee has been established to manage all BIA security, including both passenger and cargo flights, and is headed by Yasser Mahmoud, a Druze. All of these changes, Berri noted, have sidelined the current BIA chief and known Hizballah-sympathizer Wafiq Shuqair. Berri asked if this was not enough to get BIA reopened, complaining that the initial 8/17 Middle East Airlines and Royal Jordanian Airlines flights from Amman to Beirut had been a mere "back-patting exercise" and photo op.

110. (C) Berri was astonished at rumors that resupply of

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weapons to Hizballah from Syria may have already begun, even via regular highways. Seeming genuinely puzzled, Berri asked, "Why doesn't the government just send the LAF there or set up roadblocks?" He also suggested that "Kofi needs to go to Damascus and Tehran" to get at the source of the problem. Ultimately, Berri believes that the border can be controlled by deploying the LAF and ISF, but that if the GOL needs further support, "we will go to UNIFIL."

#### COMMENT

111. (C/NF) Though not all of what Berri said was entirely clear to us, especially regarding his reconstruction plan, his comments on the Bashar speech are enlightening and refreshing coming from him. Though we didn't raise the issue of President Lahoud with him, we would like to hope that he is contemplating the removal of Lahoud, the most prominent symbol of Syria's bullying interference in Lebanon (and someone of whom Berri is quite disdainful). There would be dividends for Berri too, since changing the President would remove a key protector of Hizballah and would allow for reform of the LAF now deployed in the strongly-Hizballah South, which was once Amal territory.

112. (C/NF) A savvy political operator, Berri would not miss a chance to take down his devout Shi'a colleagues -- if he thought he would win. Until he knows he can beat Hizballah, though, he is likely to maintain the Shia solidarity alliance, even though that very alliance marginalizes him in comparison to the position of Hassan Nasrallah. During the Israeli-Hizballah fighting, Berri's leading role was restored, as Siniora and others turned to Berri for a sense

of what the Shia street (and Hizballah) would do. Berri clearly craves using reconstruction funds to maintain his revived position, but we doubt the green eye shade-wearing Siniora would willing turn over donor funds to Berri to manage.

FELTMAN